

Proposed Pilot Project:
Southeast Region's Youth and Careers in Nature Initiative
FWS Youth Ambassadors Program
Using New Media to Develop Tomorrow's Nature Constituency

One of Secretary Salazar's key priorities for the Department is a focus on today's youth, educating them on possible careers in nature, and developing the next generation of conservation leaders. Using funding provided for this initiative, the Southeast Region would like to propose a pilot program to create opportunities for youth around the region to connect with nature, the work of the Service, and each other. As a placeholder, we propose calling it the FWS Youth Ambassadors Program. The pilot would involve selecting 10 Service offices around the region that would select one high school age student (Junior/Senior) to be a Youth Ambassador for that field station. They would serve in this capacity for one year with four desired objectives: serve as leaders to promote conservation awareness with their peers; learn about the operation of the field station, the Service and career opportunities; provide a "youth" perspective to Service staff on how that station could reach out to and be more relevant to today's youth; and finally to connect with fellow ambassadors around the region and share their experience. Each ambassador assigned to a field station will research and become actively involved with events, staff, volunteers and friends organizations in an effort to promote the station to the public; in particular the younger generation.

What makes this possible, and exciting, is the opportunity to utilize the new media currently available. A massive global communication network (the Internet) has proliferated around us. At best, we have dipped our toes into this ocean of collaborative, collective opportunity. Communication technology and culture has changed dramatically in the past decade. Though the fundamentals of communication have not changed, the new mechanisms and styles of public engagement are nothing short of revolutionary.

The Service has struggled to be a leader (or really even a player) in the Web-based communication revolution. The agency has shining stars and bright spots - innovative individuals and programs who have embraced social and collaborative media opportunities. Many other conservation organizations like The Nature Conservancy, Audubon Society, Children and Nature Network and government agencies like the National Park Service have expanded their online efforts and mobilized people for real conservation action.

Fresh communication approaches require new tools, techniques, skills, knowledge and an openness to innovation - and changes in management and communication culture. As we embark on this new era of change, our younger generation is relying more and more on the advances in new media as means of communication. What better way to promote our conservation message

than through the next generation of conservation leaders? In order to do this we must fully indulge them in our culture in a way they understand - -through new media.

The program would require some initial training, coordination, and oversight. The training, web based and interactive, would be conducted by External Affairs program staff in the region and would provide the youth with the knowledge and understanding needed to promote the Service through new media technology. Ideally, we would prefer a meeting (in the regional office or a centrally located field station) of the selected students, their parents, and a FWS liaison to welcome, train, and let the students meet each other. However, this would be costly and we would like to use available funding as wisely as possible.

We are proposing a budget of \$30,000 to cover purchase of video recording equipment and costs of administering the pilot. Included in the total, each station would receive \$1000 for support and each ambassador would receive a \$1000 stipend to pay for gas/mileage and incidental expenses associated with their volunteer work at the field station.

Participant Qualifications

Minimum of a B average

Proficient with Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube

Excellent writing skills, demonstrated by a 2 page essay (*Subject ideas: why/how do conservation and social media go together? what ideas do you have to change the way your generation sees wildlife conservation?*)

Interest in conservation, wildlife, and/or biology

Demonstrates leadership among peers

Participates in nature clubs or conservation organizations, etc. = bonus points

Agrees to volunteer 20 hours a month at the FWS field station. Some of this time could be accomplished away from the station when promoting outreach for that station, blogging about conservation issues, asking questions on blogs, working on their videos, posting to the Service Facebook page, etc.. Note: many high schools require a minimum number of volunteer hours to graduate. The Service would work with the respective high school to have volunteer hours apply to the graduation requirement.

Field Station Requirements

In order for the program to be completely successful, it is imperative that each of the 10 field stations selected has a staff member, intern, or volunteer that can supervise the youth ambassador. The benefits of this program for the station will be a youth perspective on station operations, increased outreach opportunities (especially targeting youth), and dependent on the workload, an extra pair of hands to help out with research projects, events and other duties. The Southeast Region External Affairs staff will provide technical support related to new media.

On FWS field stations where a Friends Group is active, the youth ambassador would become a youth liaison/ non-voting board member, attending meetings and learning about the business of the Friends Group, providing a youth perspective when applicable.

Required on-the-job New Media Activities

A blog will be created in accordance with the Service Blog Policy. The blog will serve as a forum for students to communicate their experiences with each other, and with the world.

- Commenting will be turned on for the blogs.
- The blog will be prominently linked on the southeast homepage.
- Each student has a minimum of ___ number of blog entries per (week/month?)

At the beginning, middle, and conclusion of the program, each student will record a 1-2 minute blog entry discussing their ideas, hopes, and fears about the program. These videos will be posted as entries to their blog.

Each student will be provided a Flip camera to film interesting activities at “their” field station.

- These snapshots into their daily work should be no less than 1 minute but no more than 3 minutes.
- Jennifer Strickland will create a playlist on the Service YouTube channel and will be responsible for posting these videos.

Students may send tweets to Jennifer Strickland to be shared on the southeast Twitter page.

Students are also encouraged to tweet to their personal Twitter accounts throughout the day while on the job.

Students should engage with the Service's page and group on Facebook. Once in a while, instead of going to the job site they are allowed to go home and share their experiences, photos, etc. on Facebook.

Actively involved in day-to-day operations of field station as assigned by supervisory staff member (ie: Friend's Group meetings, special events on refuge, regional office events)

Additional Notes

Issue with Blogging: In order for the students to be able to create a blog on the FWS site we'd have to do all that IT training business and create fws.gov accounts for them. An alternative option would be to allow them to create a blog on a simple blogging site, such as Blogger.com or Wordpress.com, and then link to that site from the Southeast page. The only issue there is that they'd be using a 3rd party site outside of the government to do government work. This is something we'd need to discuss with IT.

In order to volunteer, a volunteer agreement must be signed at orientation

Tweeting during the day: It would be a great idea to allow the students to tweet about their activities to their personal Twitter accounts throughout the day.

Journaling: suggest at orientation to carry a pad around while on site, but what counts as a journal entry will be what you blog online

Clubs: We would like to have the ambassador provide as much benefit as possible in helping to promote conservation awareness to the younger generations. Students that are active in a conservation club or related organization would rank higher in the selection process, especially those that hold leadership positions.

Connecting People With Nature: In addition to helping meet the Department's Youth Initiative, this has a strong nexus to the region's CPWN efforts. This program will work with regional coordinators and outreach efforts realized through this program will be reported on the CPWN Accomplishment Report..